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KEYNOTE
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PRAISE GOD WITH BOLD DEEDS

- Leadership -

There is a wonderful incident in Norman Mailer's retelling of the gospel story when Jesus is reflecting on his choice of friends. He has been criticized for associating with the wrong people, sinners and publicans:

> "Why did I seek out men who would rather eat and drink than pray? ... These publicans were rarely solemn. Still I trusted the good spirit between us. It was not a time to fast. There was much to prepare for the Lord. To fast would make us gloomy, and we would become like those who praise God with their words but remain so afraid of other men that they can never praise him by bold deeds."

I was captivated, I confess, by those images of Mailer. Who, by the way, other than Norman Mailer, would attempt to tell the life of Jesus in the first person? I don't recommend it as a replacement for Kenneth Bailey or Raymond Brown as a source of scholarly insight into the New Testament narrative, but Mailer, the artist, does capture some essentials. And, artist that he is, he sees with clarity truth that became dull with much handling, truth that no longer startles because we have become weary with the words, truth that has lost all of its urgency and passion because those of us to whom God has entrusted it have become absorbed in the mainstream of an institution which, literally translated, means our lives, our livelihood. We fast and draw lines in the sand, and make strong our boundaries and turn our energy to the latest constitutional amendment and we are so afraid that we can never praise God with bold deeds.

We're talking about leadership and I'm already too far down the road.

I was captivated by Norman Mailer's insight and I thought about it a lot last week – because I attended two

very long and consummately boring meetings, of my Presbytery and the GAC, the business of both of which on that occasion was the revision of the Manual of Operations.

Now this is not altogether fair – institutions need manuals of operations – but I'm not making this up – the Presbyterian Church called me and many others away from our life in the world, our laughing and loving and earning money and managing our time and resources and energy and sat us down for several hours to discuss whether in the Manual, it should say "chairperson" or simply "chair."

The subject is leadership and the context is a time in history that is producing literally thousands of books, essays and articles on the subject and at the very same time not producing many leaders, or refusing to allow those who would or could to lead, or attacking those who have been elected or appointed to lead.

And our immediate context is this church – this Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the year of our Lord 1998 – its 210th year of existence as a church: at a time in its

sometimes glorious and sometimes sad history when we reflect with mirror-like precision our culture's schizophrenia on the topic of leadership. The scuttlebutt, as we all know, is that you have to be a saint or psychotic to want to be Executive Director of the GAC or Director of anything in the church these days. Fortunately, saint and psychotic are not always mutually exclusive.

I digress. The topic is leadership. The big context is the culture. The immediate context is the church and its tradition.

I have already shared some of my reflections, experiences and conclusions from my year of service as Moderator of the GA. Let me have at it again, this time leading to some comments on leadership for the future.

This church of ours is a marvel. You wouldn't know that if all you read about the Presbyterian Church comes from the pages of publications whose purpose is to change the church by convincing readers that there is something wrong at the heart of our denomination and its leadership that requires correction. There is a place for advocacy journalism in the body politic and with every responsible

organization. Indeed, the existence of a vital and free society depends on the freedom to criticize and argue vigorously for change. Historian Martin Marty says flatly: "One cannot have a republic without argument" (*The One and the Many*, Harvard, 1997, 154). The problem is that most of what Presbyterians read and think they know about our church comes from the pages of polemic publications that deplore much of what the Presbyterian Church is and does, publications that specialize in the "Presbyterian crisis du jour." And somewhere in the middle of that dynamic, the reality of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gets lost.

Moderators know it. Moderators spend a year traveling throughout our church, visiting presbyteries, synods, mission projects, colleges, seminaries, and congregations. Every Sunday the Moderator is privileged to experience the life of a different Presbyterian congregation. What a jarring contrast, between what the advocacy press says about us and what actually is happening where our church lives, moves, and has its being: in the life of its congregations! The Moderator deserves a church which is marvelously alive and faithful and vital and hopeful, in congregations of astonishing

diversity. It is deeply moving to witness the faithfulness of Presbyterian congregations and people everywhere engaged in the work of our Lord – baptizing babies, nurturing children, teaching the young, standing with young families, caring for the sick, comforting the grieving – and, everywhere, reaching out to their neighborhoods and towns and cities in ministries of compassion and justice. Literally everywhere in this country, Presbyterian people are doing the work of Jesus, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, healing the sick, visiting the prisoners.

In a *New York Times* editorial, Peter Steinfels reported a recent study of service projects provided by local churches in major metropolitan areas and what it would cost the municipalities to provide these same services. In Philadelphia alone, the figure amounted to $70 million annually. The Moderator of the General Assembly sees it every week, and I will never forget it, never cease being grateful for this marvelous church of ours.

We are an old church. It's part of our glory and it is part of the challenge of our future. Most media attention

recently has been devoted to the phenomenon of the megachurches, most of them new, most of them trying desperately, and succeeding, not to look, sound, or feel like a traditional church. But we've been around in North America for something like 325 years. We were here 150 years before there was a United States of America. Our forebears brought to the New World their feisty Calvinism with its distrust of hierarchies and its stubborn insistence on freedom and representation, and the creative interface of theology and life. By the time of the War for Independence, the Presbyterian Church was here in strength, proclaiming the gospel, establishing schools and colleges, evangelizing, teaching, and building hospitals, many of which still bear our name. It is our glory.

We have a Presbyterian Historical Society with a real story to tell. Our history is also our greatest challenge. Many of our congregations give evidence of it, located in old neighborhoods in older cities, living in and struggling to maintain old buildings. Because we are a faithful church of Jesus Christ and not a business enterprise whose evaluative criteria are numbers and profits, we have stayed in those old buildings in old neighborhoods in old cities, hanging on for dear life as the world changed

and continues to change around us. We love to wring our hands about membership loss and the decline of Presbyterianism. But it is, at least in part, a story of faithfulness, of congregations staying with their neighbors, of a denomination investing its resources and energy to sustain those congregations.

The challenge of the future is to continue our faithful presence but also to discover new ways to be the church. The leadership challenge of the future is to create and invest energy and resources in a vision of a new church for a new century.

What an exercise in "ecclesiastical culture shock" to return from traveling in the church and visiting mission partners who look to us for strength, encouragement, resources and leadership to return to a church that feels, for all the world, like it doesn't want to be a church any longer. Every day I read an article, essay, or personal letter from a Presbyterian who has concluded that the time has come to sacrifice the unity of our church, that we are already two churches, that we need to "take back the church" or "declare our dissent from the church" or "become a church within a church." Every day I talk to

Presbyterians who are ready to give up on the project of being a denomination with people who have different opinions on this or that. I believe we are at a critical time in the long history of our church. And I know that I am not alone in my weariness over this ideological warfare that divides us and my longing for a way to help my church reinvest its energy and passion and resources in its mission. It is a time that desperately needs extraordinary leadership.

Is there anything to be learned from our own past? We romanticize and lionize with perhaps more nostalgia than is appropriate the days when we had real leaders, recognizable leaders, larger than life leaders.

- Kevin Neigh
- John Coventry Smith
- and, of course, Eugene Carson Blake.

Is there anything to learn? Blake was the subject of a symposium at Princeton recently, sponsored jointly by the WCC and NCC and an invitation to raise money to create scholarships for Presbyterians to study at Bossey

combined with an internship at the WCC and NCC. The development of ecumenical leadership is the goal.

I was asked to prepare a paper on Blake, the pastor.

What a leader he was: a successful pastor of two large churches, Albany and Pasadena. Blake shaped each church, led it, became more involved in the world. Each grew.

I noted how thoroughly Blake, as a pastor, did his homework.

He preached prophetically but based his ministry on

- pastoral availability
- attention to youth education.

He attended to his institutional responsibilities.

Paid his dues by community and church involvement.

Earned respect – affection and the right to be a leader.

The three things for which he will be most remembered were: his arrest in Baltimore and his service at Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, and the combat racism of the "WCC" "Bold Deeds."

Blake had to be taught and brought along on racial justice.

Christian unity grew out of his sense of the Lordship of Jesus Christ – big vision of ecumenism.

And also, my pragmatic concern that if Protestant Christian faith was to have public impact and credibility, it had to be ecumenical.

Anything to learn: yes – boldness, this faith base: Blake's simply Christological foundation.

Paying institutional dues
Risk-taking.

It is helpful, I think, to take a step back from the immediacy of our situation, to check in with other disciplines and enterprises, and to put our current

dilemma into a larger context. Peter Drucker, management consultant and theorist, introduces a recent article on leadership with this succinct observation: "As the twentieth century winds down, our disappointment with leaders is escalating rapidly." Drucker lists the corporate and governmental leaders who have fallen in the past decade and suggests that, "Our disappointment stems from the inexorable sea of change in the conditions of leadership imposed by our new global environment." He quotes Vaclav Havel, who recently declared, "Something is on the way out, and something else is painfully being born" (*Drucker Management*, spring 1997, vol. 1). Historians say the same thing about he period in American history immediately preceding the Civil War. Havel's statement also reminds us of Paul's wonderful image of the whole creation groaning in the travail of labor, as the new creation, the new being in Jesus Christ, is born.

Drucker's simple, clear observation is that high technology has forever transformed the way leaders must lead. High-tech communication has spawned an incredible new diversity in the body politic – like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Instant communication

spawns diversity, which spawns conflicting agendas and "calls into play separatism, tribalism, nationalism." Sounds like my church!

Drucker describes the complexion of this new, factious environment:

- splintering nations
- disintegrating and reconstituted alliances
- increasing group pride
- proliferation of narrowly defined, often singe-issue political groups.

Is that a description of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

Drucker is calling for a "New Paradigm of Connective Leadership." By that, he means leadership that can "negotiate, persuade, and integrate conflicting groups, inspiring both supporters and opponents to work together for the common good." That – in case you've never tried it – is what moderators do, and it is not easy. Sometimes it feels impossible. The key, Drucker says, is keeping your

eye on the connections between conflicting visions: "Connective leaders see connections where traditional leaders see only chasms."

So, where are the connections in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? Is there common ground upon which people in conflict can stand? That is the challenge for new leaders.

Some are saying that it is too late, that we are already divided into two, perhaps three groups with irreconcilable differences on fundamental matters. And yet ... and yet... our best tradition as Reformed Christians is an intentional commitment to discourse and dialogue as a way to get at truth. In a sense, we invented the notion of public, civil discourses in the modern world.

Marty says we must keep talking. Leadership fosters conversation, never shuts it off, holds out to the very end for more talk, dialogue, argument, discussion. I don't think we've finished talking with one another yet. I know we haven't.

In *The One and the Many*, Marty suggests that the ideological divide that separates Americans from one another on a variety of issues is not really a chasm in the middle of the society, but rather two platforms with a huge valley between them. Twenty-five percent of the population live on the plateaus, 75 percent in the valley between them: 15 percent are on the right plateau, firing salvos over the valley at the 10 percent of the population on the left. The left 10 percent return the fire, aiming at the 15 percent on the right. The 75 percent in the middle observe the warfare, sometimes lean right or left, occasionally get hit by the fire, and almost never are willing to fight to the death, which means sacrificing the unity, integrity, and life of the society for ideological purity, right or left.

This is not to say that 75 percent of us are neutral on the big issues which are dividing us. Not at all. When asked to respond to the specific issues of ordination of homosexuals or abortion, a clear majority of Presbyterians oppose the first and prefer freedom of choice for the second. The question before us is this: Are these issues the ones that precipitate the sacrifice of our church's unity? It is my suggestion that about 25 percent of us are

ready to say yes, while 75 percent of us, who may lean one way or the other on the particular issues, are willing to live with diversity, extend acceptance and grace, and, above all else, keep talking. My strong sense is that 25 percent of us are willing to stop the debate, resolve the issue once and for all, absorb whatever losses result to the unity of the church, and move on, while 75 percent of us are willing to keep talking in the interests of our church's unity in diversity.

The challenge of leadership to enable the second alternative, in my opinion. The temptation for all of us, and, believe me, it is very real, is to resolve it, shut off debate, and move on. Strong leaders must help us resist that temptation and gird ourselves for more talk, argument, and dialogue, and life in a family that is not close to agreement.

Is there not way to declare a cease-fire? Is there no way to declare a moratorium on amendments to the constitution and at the same time a moratorium on name-calling and accusing one another of insincerity, unfaithfulness, duplicity, and deception? Would it not be a good idea if the combatants retired to their separate

corners and gave themselves and all of us a much-needed respite?

Moderators know how difficult that proposal is. Some would say its impossible. Efforts to effect it feel like capitulation and betrayal to one side or the other and often both. The one thing the right and left agree on, it seems, is that the moderate middle is wrong, weak, compromising, and unfaithful. And that is precisely where leaders must be, whatever the cost.

Drucker advises us to find the connections in the meantime. It was my privilege to work on a daily basis with the newly elected stated clerk of our General Assembly. Cliff Kirkpatrick's dream, which I happily share, is to help all of us refocus on our precious Presbyterian/Reformed tradition by studying, celebrating, rallying around, and investing ourselves in the implementation of the Six Great Ends of the church. I hope new leadership will press forward with that timely invitation. I know Cliff Kirkpatrick will.

The connections that can hold us together while we continue to talk are, I believe, those things we have done

so well and so faithfully in the past. I look forward to the day when, instead of arguing about sexuality, we Presbyterians will focus our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love on:

- Higher Education: exploring new ways to relate to our colleges and universities, aggressively creating new ministries and a strong presence on the campuses of our public universities.

- Public Theology: entering into dialogue, from our Reformed theological perspective, with the major cultural currents that are creating a new world-media, arts, leisure time, free-market economics, globalization, and high-tech communication.

- Public Advocacy: I have missed our strong voice recently. Even when I did not agree with the positions our church took I was always glad to hear Presbyterian convictions expressed on the important issues of the day. I do think we are trying to say too much about too many issues and so hardly anyone is listening to us any longer. I wish for a narrowing of our concerns and

refocusing on public education, for instance, a Presbyterian agenda if there ever was one.

- Racial Justice: Wouldn't it be something if we Presbyterians actually did something about racial inclusiveness instead of passing resolutions?

- Public Celebration and Evangelism: After the glorious opening worship at General Assembly in Syracuse someone quipped, "Why, we looked like a megachurch this morning." Presbyterians love to celebrate our history, tradition, and mission. Every time we schedule a large, visible, public event, Presbyterians travel whatever distance is involved and show up to be the church together. It is a great public witness and effective evangelism. Why can't we do it in every presbytery, one Sunday morning, every year, all across the country?

Blake's ministry began and proceeded through a time of enormous social and cultural change.

Shortly after his ordination in 1932 a retired minister said to him "I'm glad it's you who is beginning your ministry. things are changing so much I couldn't face being a pastor now." Blake lived through the Great Depression, World War II, post-war economic and demographic change, McCarthyism, Korea, Civil Rights and Vietnam.

We live in a time characterized by the most rapid social and cultural change in the history of humankind Ten year old global maps are hopelessly out-of-date. The Soviet Union is gone. Russian troops serve under American commanders in Bosnia. The Pope is in Cuba celebrating mass and Fidel Castro was in the congregation. Twenty-five percent of the words we routinely use did not exist twenty-five years ago. A "crack salesman" used to very effective sales representative for IBM. Futurist Leonard Sweet calls it a "Phase Transition," a major shifting of the cultural tectonic plates with a greater potential impact than the invention of the printing press and moveable type.

The question, of course, is how to be a faithful Church of Jesus Christ in the brand new world we are

facing. And how to induce our lively tradition to respond creatively to the new world without losing its integrity.

Blake was clear that his faith centered in his trust in Jesus Christ and his commitment to the basic mission of the church as bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and bringing people to God in Christ. And then he trusted the church, his own Presbyterian Church, as the best vehicle for his vocation in all the changes ahead.

We simply must learn to be more reflexive, responsive in a world that is changing so rapidly that we risk becoming an anachronism is our own life time. And we must do it without abandoning the faith and the theological tradition that has been handed to us by the generations before us - starting with Blake's.

Parenthetically - can you imagine the energy, renewal and growth that would occur if the Roman Catholic church decided to respond faithfully to what has happened to this role and identity and very being of women in our time?

Unfortunately we don't have to waste timecritiquing the Romans. My sense is that if we don't do something quick and radical and dramatic about the urban church - we, you and I will be known as the Presbyterian Amish of our time - so committed to doing it the same way as we always did - that we become a small, precious but very significantly marginal ecclesiastical entity in the future. Forget future - we're 75% of the way there in Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Blake seized Civil Rights, poverty as the realities to which the church needed to respond a generation ago. Not surprisingly Reinhold Niebuhr said that it was Civil Rights that saved the Protestant churches from irrelevance.

The crisis of our day is the slow relentless death of the urban churches. *Presbyterians Today* documented it in the last issue:

	Presbyterian Churches		Presbyterian Members	
Cities	1967	1997	1967	1997
Chicago	143	118	87,882	43,315
Cleveland	72	56	49,064	17,886
Detroit	101	91	81,891	42,017
New York	116	107	41,785	19,142
Philadelphia	182	152	103,953	47,332
San Francisco/ Oakland	35	20	13,243	4,177

Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the haunting experience of visiting the sites of early Christian churches in Turkey, observing that Christianity was once a vital force with many thriving churches. Today all that is left in ruins. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. The same thing is happening before our very eyes in our cities.

Why? There are a lot of people who think they know and we have lots and lots of data on racial, economic and demographic change in the cities. We have interesting and lively experiences in urban ministry. What we don't

know much about, I would submit, is how to create urban congregations that thrive and grow.

Please understand - we know about how to be a big, urban cathedral. We may know more about that than anyone else, by the way. And we know how to be suburban and county seat. We're learning, I think, how to be rural. But I don't think we know how to be urban.

We have, first of all, lots of old buildings, badly in need of repair, built for a world that doesn't exist any longer. And in those buildings we have aging congregations declining in numbers for very understandable reasons.

And we have a system that finds it virtually impossible to help those congregations this side of the inevitable Presbytery Commission to perform last rites and arrange for the funeral and we're not even very good at that.

The fundamental challenge of the current urban church is raising enough money to meet the Presbytery minimum. Who answers the call, obviously, are brand new

ministers whose agenda after about a year and a half becomes getting a new call with a little more money and a little less institutional depression.

The fact that newly ordained clergy have an annoying pattern of getting married and having babies guarantees that they won't be around long.

Who else answers the call - Ministers about to retire.

Now, do forgive me. Some of the most heroic, competent and faithful colleagues I know are the exceptions to these rules. But we don't make it easy.

I don't have the answer - but like Blake I believe in the Presbyterian Church's ability to discover it.

I wonder if it isn't time to think anew and stretch the tradition.

Is the old Victorian church building what it should look like?

Is the Presbytery minimum salary a helpful dynamic?

Do we need a new order of Presbyterian urban missionaries, trained, disciplined, under vows for five years, who will as William Stringfellow advised, live with the poor and let the Holy Spirit and the people create a new form of church?

Do we need to sell off six dying churches and create one new one with a pastor, educator, community organizer, youth worker, housed in a store front with fiscal know-how to the Mac Arthur Foundation or Fourth Church, or First Church Wheaton and say - for $100,000 per year - you can help to create a new church?

Do we need to ask Bill Hybells, God forbid, to a conversation, not on church music, but on responding to new realities instead of slowly but surely dying?

Blake learned what he needed to know as a pastor in three churches that challenged him to grow, and in each case part of his growth came as a result of an intentional relationship with a strong predecessor. In fact, that pattern repeated itself when Blake succeeded W. A.

Visser't Hooft, an accomplished linguist and distinguished scholar who had helped to found the World Council of Churches in 1948. Blake avoided the twin mistakes of trying to emulate his predecessor or contradicting him, by seeking Visser't-Hooft's advice and counsel, giving him an office and secretary at World Council of Churches headquarters and meeting with him regularly. [p.151]

We Presbyterians are inclined to wring our hands about this perilous new situation or, more typically, to accuse one another of causing the demise of the old structures and realities. I have an alternative strategy based on my conviction that the Holy Spirit is moving with freshness and new energy in the church and the world and that our task is not to fight rearguard actions with one another to preserve our pasts, but to hold on to one another as we try to discern what the Spirit is saying and where the Spirit is leading.

Church leaders should keep a three-by-five card in their pockets for daily reference:

> Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
(Isaiah 43:18-19a)

Clearly there is a relocation of attention, followed by intellectual energy and financial resources, going on in the world, nationally and locally. And just as clearly, people involved in national structures are challenged to think and work in new ways.

There is, for instance, tremendous energy for mission today in the Presbyterian Church at the congregational level. Thousands of Presbyterian congregations are building houses with Habitat for Humanity, sending work teams to Africa and Central America, and establishing new relationships with congregations and mission projects all over the world, from our large urban centers to remote parts of Africa and South America. And the task of national leadership is to nurture that new energy, to coordinate and facilitate the growing mission involvement of Presbyterian people. The day of a global mission program in which the only local involvement is writing checks or exchanging friendly letters with missionaries is over.

Our urban areas are crying for new forms of the church. What we did relatively successfully for several centuries does not work in the city of the twenty-first century. We have old buildings that require enormous resources to maintain, oftentimes in places where people no longer live. We need to think anew, to reinvent a new church for a new day.

Can we produce leadership for the fabulous future we are facing? Can we nurture and support people who will lead us to praise God with bold deeds?

Of course we can. But we will have to generate the grace and courage to transcend the ideological divides that fracture our church and paralyze our ability to act at all. We have been hunkered down in a defensive posture for so long, the very ideas of bold Presbyterian initiatives and bold Presbyterian leaders sound curious to our ears. But they are what we need.

The Presbyterian Church needs:

- Leaders who are visionaries and who will help us discover where the Spirit is leading.

- Leaders who can articulate the vision with eloquence and integrity.

- Leaders who are risk-takers and who can encourage our embattled church to shake off its defensiveness and act boldly.

- Leaders who simply will not accommodate the status quo.

- Leaders who base their ministries on the biblical notion of servanthood and who teach and express in their own leadership the words of Jesus: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Our church is commonly characterized as sick. That is not my experience.

I believe we're sick and tired of fighting; sick of expending our financial and spiritual resources contending with one another; sick of the relentless negativism about our Presbyterian Church.

But no, we're not sick. We're ready to become a new church for a new day, a church more than capable of producing new leaders who, in the best tradition of our own history, will lead a new generation of Presbyterians to praise God boldly.